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SUBJECT: LEBANON: RISING CONCERN ABOUT UNSCR 1701
IMPLEMENTATION AS POLITICAL IMPASSE CONTINUES

Classified By: Ambassador Alejandro D. Wolff, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Over the past week, the Israeli Mission, Secretariat officials, and departing UN Special Coordinator

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for Lebanon Geir Pedersen have expressed concern to USUN about increasing risks to the implementation of UNSCR 1701 as attention in Lebanon has largely been focused on the country's continuing political impasse. Pedersen predicts that Lebanon will remain in a state of "complete political deadlock" for a "long while," and that Hizballah could exploit this situation to provoke a small-scale conflict with Israel that would enhance its credentials as a "resistance" organization inside Lebanon. The Israeli Mission reports that some parts of the GOI believe Hizballah has completely re-armed, that UNIFIL is too passive in the face of such re-armament, and that Israel should begin speaking out about the failures of UNSCR 1701. While the UN Secretariat seems to share Israeli concerns about the risks to UNSCR 1701 implementation, it rejects Israeli claims that Hizballah has re-armed in south Lebanon, and insists that UNIFIL cannot search homes or take more aggressive action without the Lebanese Armed Forces under its "Chapter VI" mandate. USUN has urged the Secretariat to submit a strong report on UNSCR 1701 (due February 28), in order for the Council to clearly reaffirm its commitment to UNSCR 1701 implementation via a PRST, but Israel and Lebanon must also do their part to influence the Secretariat over the coming weeks. End Summary.

Pedersen: Political Deadlock or Civil War

¶2. (C) During a February 5 meeting with Amb Wolff, a pessimistic UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Geir Pedersen predicted that Lebanon would remain in a state of "complete political deadlock" for a "long while." He suggested that March 8th had realized Michel Suleiman is "not the man they thought he was," and are therefore pushing for a blocking third in the Cabinet to protect against a March 14-Suleiman conspiracy. But at the same time, Hizballah cannot be seen as hostile to the LAF, which is why March 8 continues to support Suleiman in name. Suleiman also reportedly faces pressure from within the LAF to publicly withdraw his candidacy and save the army from the embarrassment of a failed presidential bid. All the while, assassinations continue in Lebanon, which Pedersen said were most likely the work of the Syrian Government but could also have been carried out by jihadist groups.

¶3. (C) Arguing that Suleiman now has a "slim" chance of being elected President given March 8 concerns, Pedersen said the only other option for March 14 appeared to be to elect its original choice of Nassib Lahoud via a half-plus-one vote. But he said that Hizballah has warned that a half-plus-one

vote would trigger armed conflict, a threat whose seriousness Pedersen could not gauge but should not be dismissed. Although he said it is "unclear" whether other groups are re-arming in Lebanon, Pedersen nevertheless argued that Hizballah far surpasses any other group in Lebanon, including the LAF, in terms of military equipment and training. He quoted the IDF assessment that Hizballah is ninth or tenth in the world in terms of the number of rockets it possesses. If there were a new civil war, Pedersen predicted the LAF would splinter into its different confessional components.

Israel and UN Concerned About South Lebanon

¶4. (C) Expressing concern for the implementation of UNSCR 1701, Pedersen suggested that Hizballah's approach to south Lebanon and to possible renewed conflict with Israel appears to have changed in recent weeks. He said that especially after the February 3 incident in which the IDF shot and killed two alleged Lebanese drug smugglers in the Lebanese village of Ghajar, Hizballah had made it clear that they would respond with force to future "provocations" along the Blue Line. Although Pedersen said he believes that neither Hizballah nor Iran want a new war, Pedersen said Hizballah had never kept south Lebanon quiet for more than 18 months, and he opined that a small-scale conflict with Israel could serve to heighten the group's popularity within Lebanon and burnish its credentials as a "resistance" organization. At the same time, however, Pedersen said Hizballah is aware that if its rockets kill Israeli citizens, the GOI will be compelled to respond severely. The problem for Israel, Pedersen suggested, is that it does not know whether it should target just Hizballah, the Palestinian groups in south Lebanon, or the GOL in such a strike.

¶5. (C) The Israeli Mission has recently expressed increased concern to USUN that Hizballah has re-armed in south Lebanon

USUN NEW Y 00000127 002 OF 003

and that UNIFIL needs to do more to ensure that south Lebanon is free of unauthorized armed elements or weapons. Israeli DPR Danny Carmon reported that during interagency discussions in Jerusalem held in December 2007, several Israeli defense officials argued that the GOI should cease cooperating with UNIFIL, and should speak out about its perceived failure to prevent Hizballah re-armament in south Lebanon. Carmon acknowledged that Israeli officials are constrained by the political value Israeli PM Olmert attaches to UNSCR 1701 as a positive outcome of the summer 2006 war. But he said Israel wants UNIFIL to enter south Lebanese homes and villages to search for weapons caches, and he bemoaned DPKO / UNIFIL's refusal to do so on the grounds that it cannot take Chapter VII enforcement action, because it views UNSCR 1701 as a Chapter VI resolution that requires UNIFIL to act with the LAF. Carmon also argued UNIFIL should increase the number of joint patrols with the LAF and checkpoints along the Litani river.

¶6. (C) Although Secretariat officials say they share concerns about the risk of new conflict between Israel and Lebanon, they discount GOI claims that Hizballah has re-armed south of the Litani river, and insist that UNIFIL cannot search homes on its own under its UNSCR 1701 mandate. In conversations with USUN, DPKO officers have said UNIFIL is prepared to act on any specific intelligence Israel provides of weapons caches or unauthorized armed activity in south Lebanon. But they complain that while Israel offers warnings of Hizballah re-armament, it does not provide specific, actionable intelligence. (Note: The Israelis say providing such specific intelligence would compromise their sources. End Note.) DPKO officers also say they are committed to expanding joint UNIFIL-LAF patrols and co-located checkpoints along the Litani river, but can only proceed as quickly as the LAF will allow. They also note that UNIFIL has varied the frequency and routes of its patrols both as a force protection measure and to deter would-be arms smugglers and

Hizballah militants.

The Same Old Song: Sheba'a Farms

¶7. (C) In response to the threats to UNSCR 1701 implementation, Pedersen argued for greater progress on demarcation of the Blue Line, resolution of the northern part of Ghajar (which the IDF still occupies), and prisoners, but he pushed most on the familiar issue of the Sheba'a Farms. Arguing that we "must create the impression that the Sheba'a Farms issue is not dead," he urged the USG to support a diplomatic process to hold out the hope that this issue can be resolved and that disarmament of Hizballah could therefore be put on the table. If Israel thinks it has the U.S. fully behind it on this issue, Pedersen suggested, it won't budge at all. Amb Wolff urged Pedersen to recognize that the Sheba'a issue is a means for Hizballah to legitimize its arms stockpiles and to justify its past "resistance" against Israel. Instead, the onus should rest where it belongs -- on Syria -- to delineate its border with Lebanon. Pedersen ultimately agreed with Amb Wolff's point that the worst outcome for both the GOL and the wider international community would be to turn Hizballah's "pretext" for its arms into a "justification," and to imply that Israel is the obstacle to progress. Such a situation could very well sow the seeds for a future war and set the Israel-Lebanon relationship and intra-Lebanese relations back significantly.

Pushing for a Strong UNSCR 1701 Report

¶8. (C) SYG Ban will submit his next report on UNSCR 1701 implementation o/a February 28th. DPA Middle East Division Director Lisa Buttenheim and DPA officer Michael Contet will visit Israel and Lebanon around February 15 to hold discussions with the parties to finalize the drafting process. USUN has urged the Secretariat to ensure a strong UNSCR 1701 report on the issues of disarmament, illegal weapons transfers into Lebanon, the role of Iran and Syria in violating UNSCR 1701, and the need for Syria to delineate its border with Lebanon. Amb Wolff urged Pedersen, in his farewell calls in New York as well as in his input into the UNSCR 1701 report drafting process, to ensure the SYG does not simply pay lip service to his obligation under operative paragraph 10 of resolution 1701 to develop proposals on disarmament in addition to delineation of borders. USUN also asked the Israeli Mission to arrange another briefing by an IDF General to Secretariat officials on the situation in south Lebanon as well as illegal arms transfers from Syria to ensure that Israel's views are reflected in the UNSCR 1701 report. Subsequently, the Israeli Defense Attaché briefed several UN officials on February 4 about Israel's concerns.

USUN NEW Y 00000127 003 OF 003

USUN has also asked the Israeli and Lebanese Missions as well as DPKO for an update on the negotiations over the northern part of Ghajar (which we have yet to receive).

Comment: Focus the Parties on 1701

¶9. (C) The Israelis believe the Council must respond to the SYG's next report on UNSCR 1701 with a PRST that reaffirms the UNSC's commitment to the resolution regardless of the political situation in Lebanon. We agree. In order to ensure the Council's reaction is as strong as possible, we need to ensure the Secretariat has good information on violations of UNSCR 1701 provisions in south Lebanon and in terms of illegal arms transfers from Syria. In this regard, it will also be important to ensure the GOI and the GOL are as forthright with Buttenheim and Contet on these sensitive issues as they can be. USUN also requests any information we can share with the UN about U.S. views on the situation in south Lebanon and UNIFIL's performance to date.

KHALILZAD